DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 171 022 EC 115 231

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TITLE Language Training for the Non-Verbal or Language Delayed Child.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Convention, The Council for Exceptional Children (57th, Dallas, Texas, April 22-27, 1979, Session T-35)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Discrimination Learning; *Expressive Language; Feedback; *Language Handicapped; *Learning Disabilities; *Receptive Language; Reinforcement; Syntax; *Teaching Methods; *Verbal Development

ABSTRACT

Language training for the non-verbal or language delayed child should utilize feedback to reinforce correct responses and should closely follow the syntactical development of normal children. The two basic areas of language training are receptive and expressive. Receptive language training includes attending and responding, following single phase directions, and teaching abstract language concepts. The five steps in teaching language concepts are: (1) identify the concept to be taught, (2) determine critical and non-critical attributes of the concept, (3) identify examples and non-examples of the concept, (4) present the examples and non-examples, and (5) teach the child finer and finer levels of discrimination. Expressive language includes the child's use of phonemes, morphemes, syntax, and semantics. The language delayed child's deficit must first be determined and then a program involving control of the physical surroundings, reinforcement, and monitoring must be implemented. (PHB)

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ED171022

LANGUAGE TRAINING FOR THE NON-VERBAL OR LANGUAGE DELAYED CHILD

A paper presented at the
57th Annual International Convention,
The Council for Exceptional Children
Dallas, Texas

Tuesday, April 24, 1979
Session T 35

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LANGUAGE TRAINING FOR THE NON-VERBAL OR

LANGUAGE DELAYED CHILD

Teaching the non-verbal or severe language delayed child is a challenge which many teachers of exceptional children encounter. Yet they often fail to utilize their potential skills as teachers of language. It is commonly assumed that most children acquire language through a natural process of interaction with their environment. However, children who have severe language delays have not, and probably will not, develop language unless a structured language intervention program is initiated.

Fredericks (1977) in a study titled "The Identification of Competencies in Teachers of the Severely Handicapped", sought to determine the practices, characteristics, and training of teachers who effectively influenced children's performance. He studied children who had made large academic gains and found four major variables which accounted for their higher performance.

1. Length of the instructional day. This refers to giving the child the maximum instructional time by organizing and scheduling personnel and materials.

2. A task analyzed curriculum. Teachers whose children made superior gains had a curriculum carefully broken down and sequenced.

3. Volunteers working in the classroom utilized positive consequences. Volunteers used behavioral techniques to reinforce appropriate behavior.

4. Teacher and aide utilized consequence delivery. Systematic classroom management techniques were used by teacher and aide to reinforce the learner.

These variables seem even more important when teaching language to the non-verbal or language delayed child. Each child must be provided the maximum instructional time by individualizing his language training, preferably in a one-to-one language training session. A minimum of twenty to thirty minutes of instruction daily is suggested. The language program should be task analyzed by dividing it into small steps to provide for smooth progress along a hierarchy of skills. This intervention sequence should closely follow the syntactical development of the normal child (Miller and Yoder in Schiefelbusch and Lloyd, 1974) and should relate to the child's immediate environment (Saltz, Soller, and Siegel, 1972; Bloom, 1973; Mahoney, 1975; Culatta, 1976).

It is important for the teacher to use some type of feedback system, or method of reinforcing the child when he responds correctly. The efficacy of using operant techniques with language delayed children has well been established in the literature (Garcia, Guess, and Byrnes, 1973; Reese, 1975; Hester and Hendrickson, 1976).

The intent of this paper, then, is to introduce techniques which have proven successful in working with children who have severe language delays. By utilizing these techniques the teacher can provide structure to a language training program.

Teaching language to the non-verbal or language delayed child can be divided into two basic areas, receptive language and expressive language.

Receptive Language

Receptive language involves many facets. For the severely delayed child it can mean attending and responding, following single phase directions, and at a more complex level, it may involve teaching abstract language concepts which can provide a basis for expression. The technique of concept analysis promises to be a great aid in helping teachers teach language concepts. A concept may be defined as "a set of characteristics that is shared in all instances in a particular set and only by these instances" (Engelmann, 1969), or as "a collection of stimuli and their relations which evokes a common response." (Thiagarajan, et.al., 1974). For example, important concepts for the young child or low functioning child might include concepts of space - top, bottom, middle; concepts of time - before, after; concepts of quantity - some, many, few; and concepts of size - big, little.

A five step procedure is suggested for implementing concept analysis in the teaching of language concepts to the language delayed child.

1. Identify the concept to be taught. For example, the teacher may decide to teach the concept of "big".

2. Identify the critical and non-critical attributes of the concept. Critical attributes are those which differentiate a concept from other concepts. Non-critical attributes, in this instance, might include color, position, and shape, etc.

3. Identify examples and non-examples of the concept to be learned. Examples of the concept "big" might include a mountain, whale, a large building, etc. Non-examples might include a flea, a pinpoint, a jellybean, or a baby.

4. Present the child with examples and non-examples of the concept. This can be done with concrete objects or with pictures of the concept. The child, for instance, is then asked to choose which one is big when presented with two choices (one an example of big, and another a non-example). Numerous examples will teach the child to generalize his findings of the concept "big" to other large objects. Non-examples teach the child to discriminate between differing concepts.

5. Finally, the child must learn to make finer and finer levels of discrimination. At the beginning, you may contrast gross size differences such as mountain and flea. As the child succeeds in making such gross discriminations, he may be presented with a choice between finer characteristics, such as comparing a baseball and a basketball, where he must choose the one which is "big".

The list of concepts which can be taught using the technique of concept analysis is endless, and one can readily see the potential it holds for teaching language concepts to the language delayed child.

Expressive Language

Expressive language refers to how the child uses speech sounds (phonology) and forms of words (morphology) in forming words into a structure (syntax) to express meaningful thoughts (semantics).

Children with language delays may have failed to develop one or more of these components. Children with language difficulties may be non-verbal or communicate in gestures or primitive noises. They may speak in single, two or three word phrases, and may exhibit echolalia. In addition, they may use plural nouns incorrectly, and such constructions as noun-verb agreement, pronouns, and future and past tenses may not yet be included in the child's repertoire. Determining the language deficit is the first step to prescribing the nature and content of the language

program to be provided. But whatever the content of the language training, there are some techniques which may maximize the success for the child.

Control of the Physical Environment

It is of utmost importance that the teacher maintain eye contact with the child, to ensure that the child is attending. If teacher and child are sitting face to face in chairs at a close distance, attending will be more readily achieved. If picture cards are to be used as visual stimuli, it is important to keep them at eye level for the child. Materials should be ready at the start of the training session, with reinforcers out of reach of the child. Response forms or data collection sheets should be within easy reach, so that as the child responds, the teacher can immediately record correct and incorrect responses, thereby diminishing errors frequently occuring when recording is left to memory.

A Reinforcement System

Success has been found using an S→R→S (stimulus→response→stimulus) model. The visual stimuli, an object or picture presented along with verbal stimuli (S) requires the child to respond in a certain way (R). This, in turn, is followed by the antecedent stimulus (S) or reinforcer. Depending on the child, these reinforcers may include primary reinforcers such as edibles, tangible reinforcers such as favorite games or activities, or social reinforcers, such as handshakes or praise.

Monitoring Progress

It is necessary to be able to continuously monitor the child's progress in the language intervention program. This can be easily

accomplished through the use of daily recording sheets which aid the teacher in keeping track of correct and incorrect responses. The teacher must initially set a criterion for mastery. For example, the criterion may be 8 out of 10 correct responses. If the teacher records the child's responses he will know the exact moment the criterion is met, and can advance the child to the next language objective. Additional recording information may also be of value to the teacher. For example, the recording device may also include the presence of cues; the reinforcer used during the language training; reinforcer effectiveness; the number of approximations the child made; the number of times the child makes no response; the amount of time it took to reach criterion; and if the session was a new task or a retention check. The teacher will need to experiment to determine what information is important to record.

Summary

The use of concept analysis in teaching language concepts holds great promise for the child with severe receptive difficulties. Likewise, techniques such as controlling the physical environment, setting up a system for monitoring pupil progress, and utilizing a reinforcement system can aid the teacher in structing a language intervention program for children with expressive language problems.

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